

# Using a Data Lens to Strengthen Your Work



## INTRODUCTION

Data is everywhere, but philanthropy and the nonprofit sector lag behind in how to make it work for us. Many organizations collect data, but few use it to be strategic, to build their program's capacity, or to bring voice to issues that matter most. By integrating a data lens into your work, you'll work smarter through refined questions and solutions, and new collaborations. In this guide, we'll give you some ideas to help you start applying a data lens to your work, share stories of success from other programs, and offer practical tips on overcoming challenges.

### Before jumping in, let's take a step back and ask, "what is data?"

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, it is "factual information (such as measurements or statistics) used as a basis for reasoning, discussion, or calculation."

In Foundation Center's world, we most commonly refer to information about foundations, nonprofits, and their grants as data. For example, our quantitative data set, which **grows every week**, reflects how more than 8.3 million grants totaling over \$2.5 trillion were allocated by issue and population group, among other categories.\* However, there is so much more that we collect that also counts as data. This includes qualitative data such as the more than 20,000 **reports and evaluations** on the social sector in IssueLab. It includes stories found through

case studies and blogs shared through **GrantCraft**. It's also the **news** and features found on Philanthropy News Digest. Just sharing this information doesn't make it data; it becomes data when you (yes, YOU!) use it to drive your insights and decision making.

Reflect on your organization or program.  
What kinds of data do you already collect?  
Is your data quantitative, qualitative,  
or both?

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\* Based on our dataset as of October 2017

# Why should we use data?

Data is becoming increasingly easier to find and collect. There are various data hubs (like [YouthGiving.org](#) and [census.gov](#)) out there. But clearly identifying the goals and purpose of your data efforts is key. What kinds of information do you feel like you're missing? How could having that information improve what you're doing? Are you collecting data to support existing approaches or to serve as a compass for the future?

## THERE ARE TWO DISTINCT REASONS TO COLLECT AND USE DATA:

1

### COMPLIANCE

Often, organizations are mandated to collect data due to an external party request. Data use here is for accountability.

2

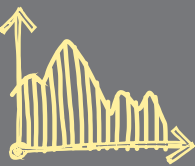
### STRATEGY, LEARNING, AND EVALUATING

Organizations can collect and use data to define needs, set strategy, and evaluate programs. Data use here is to inform and improve work.

A data lens can also help separate emotional reasoning from rational reasoning. In grantmaking, there is a role for both; some call it balancing "the head and the heart." Whether data will help you and the youth in your program with compliance or strategy, it offers a grounded point of view that your instinct can feel free to counterbalance.

What type of data do you use for compliance?  
For strategy, learning, and evaluating?  
Is there a type of data you'd like to start collecting for each? What will it help you do?

## Harnessing Data for Evaluation



### Youth and Philanthropy Initiative

(YPI) Canada is a public charitable foundation that engages high school students to provide grants to social service organizations across the country

through an innovative curricular program. In 2017, after taking a program evaluation course, their national program manager formalized an evaluation plan for YPI based off of evaluation activities already in place. "Every year, we conduct annual pre- and post- program questionnaires with students, distribute feedback questionnaires to teachers and charity representatives, and host occasional focus groups and interviews with various stakeholders. Outside of these formal measures, we also use site visits, phone calls,

and teacher-submitted data through project management forms to evaluate our success." Creating a formal logic model helped them think about their program at a macro-level, highlight what changes YPI wanted to see as a result of their program, and what additional data would help them fill in the gaps to measure their success: "Asking questions about the things we are trying to shift made designing evaluation questions and connecting these questions to evaluation tools (e.g., surveys, interview guides) flow naturally." To read more about YPI's transformation to using a data lens, check out this [expert post](#) on YouthGiving.org.



# How can we use data?

There are specific, strategic times that organizations can use a data lens to drive how they do their work, and what work they do. Here are some of the most common ways that data can be an asset to you:



## BETTER UNDERSTAND ISSUES AND AUDIENCES

For example, if youth philanthropists in your program care about the environment, then data about CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, trash output in a city, or demographics of households that compost might be of value in more deeply exploring various facets of environment-related interventions. It would also help them (and you!) frame the issue for others through specific information. When there's data already available, use that! And when there's not, talk with other similarly questioning partners and team up to go get the data you need. (Bonus: consider making what you learn public so that others can benefit too.)



## EVALUATE SUCCESS AND TELL YOUR STORY

For example, many youth grantmakers fund food-related initiatives, like food pantries, community gardens, and healthy cooking classes. A cooking class program might use participation numbers and an end-of-class survey to determine its success. To do this, it's important to define ahead of time what success will look like by setting key performance indicators (KPIs for short) and making sure the program can measure them. They don't have to be as fancy as they sound; one might be that 5 percent of visitors to the registration webpage sign up. (How would you measure that? [Google Analytics](#) should be very helpful!) Once you have some numbers and qualitative feedback, you have the skeleton of a compelling story about the work your program funds. When you are able to balance big picture descriptions with specific anecdotes and metrics, other people can feel as excited about your activities as you do.



## INFORM FUNDING DECISIONS

Decisions can be challenging to make, especially when faced with many excellent proposals. For many youth grantmakers, learning how to decline a proposal can be especially hard. Data can help. For example, if there are three proposals about fun after-school program ideas and your youth can only fund one,

there are many data points that would be worth looking at. Does data from their needs assessment highlight a particular neighborhood or population that should be the focus of your funding? Does demographic information about the community line up with what's described in the proposal? Is there performance data from other similar programs designed by the organization? Is the budget of the project logical in the context of the organization's staffing and overall budget (in the U.S. shared on the latest Form 990)? These are great questions for youth to explore to point them in a clear direction toward a decision.



## FIND OTHERS TO CONNECT AND COLLABORATE

Most youth grantmakers work in a specific geography. For example, if your program is based in Indiana, USA, it can be smart to see who else is working there and find synergies. See if there's a local funder association or issue-based collective that publishes a member list—that's data! Similarly, issue-focused programs such as those based at an aquarium or a church benefit from connecting with each other to learn from other approaches, to team up on specific funding opportunities, or to convene a meeting with community leaders. [YouthGiving.org](#) has data for more than 850 youth grantmaking programs around the world, which might be a good place to start!

Do any of these uses for data jump out to you as particularly valuable in the coming year? What data will you collect towards that goal? How will you collect it? What do you hope to learn?

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## Spotlight on Philanthropy Data

The Global Philanthropy Data Charter is a framework created to guide organizations in the sector around the use of philanthropic data for public benefit. The nine principles listed to the right emerged from the charter as fundamental to ensuring the strategic creation, collection, processing, analysis, and sharing of that data.



[Click here](#) for more information on the Global Philanthropy Data Charter and how it can help you as you incorporate a data lens into your work!



## Data Sharing Principles

- > Clear value proposition
- > Defined roles & responsibilities
- > Scope & relevance of data
- > Timeliness & frequency of data collection
- > Procedures for ensuring data quality
  - > Standardization
- > Confidentiality & trust
  - > Data security
  - > Accessibility



## Where can we find data?

Once you've established the why and how of using a data lens, it's time to get the data! It's everywhere, and there's no way we could possibly list everything. We've listed a few free places to help you get started:

### Your community

(through surveys and interviews)

### YouthGiving.org

(resources, giving data, and program information)

### World Health Organization

(health indicators and outcomes)

### Social Progress Index

(data on social and environmental outcomes worldwide)

### IssueLab

(reports published by other social sector organizations)

### Foundation Maps

(data about who's funding what and where)

### GrantCraft

(grantmaker stories and perspectives)

### European Union Open Data Portal

(data from the European Union (EU) institutions and other EU bodies)

### Gapminder

(economic, medical and social statistics from around the world)

### The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

(data on various topics worldwide)

### Population and Housing Censuses in Europe

(demographic information)

Where else might you go for data?

Circle the 10 data sources above you'd like to try. Who will be responsible for capturing the data and translating it for the context of your work?



# OVERCOMING DATA CHALLENGES

We've tried to lay out a few ideas to help you wrap your head around how to better use data in your youth grantmaking work and beyond. However, we know you will undoubtedly face challenges. We don't want roadblocks to set you back, so let's address some of the most common challenges to help you anticipate and overcome them.



## Not Enough Time

### START SMALL

If you're new to using a data lens in your work, don't try to take on more than your organization can handle. Start by collecting one data point like attendance or applicant age during your next program cycle, and make it usable in some aspect of your work.

### GET ORGANIZED

Add processes around data collection, analysis, and communication to the calendar at the start of the year so it's built into your workflow. Then, assign someone data tasks so there is accountability.

### INCENTIVIZE

For many of us, collecting and analyzing data always falls to the bottom of the urgent to-do list. Put a few incentives like a coffee gift card or a summer Friday in place to motivate staff to dig in.



## Limited Technology

### USE TEMPLATES

Services like Survey Monkey, Survey Gizmo, and Google Forms provide users with loads of pre-populated survey questions to make data collection a snap. Try a ready-to-use form to begin and then customize it to your needs.

### LET MACHINES CRUNCH THE NUMBERS

Google Analytics is a great tool that can help you collect data about your online presence. If your services or outreach are primarily online, you can use it to learn

about your audience and how they interact with your content. And, if it's not as useful to your youth grantmaking program, consider building the data capacity of organizations you support by helping them use it.

### EMPOWER THROUGH DELEGATION

Skills around interpreting data are in high demand. Provide an intern, volunteer, or assistant a great learning opportunity by asking them to engage in data tasks for your program.

## Spotlight on Needs Assessment



Seher Cakir belongs to a YouthBank in Samsun, Turkey. YouthBank is an international organization that supports a youth-led grantmaking process for peer proposed projects within a specific community. Each locale gets to adapt the model to work for them but, it must be youth-led and inclusive. In order to determine what their peers actually need and want in their community, Seher and her YouthBank cohort interview about 200 peers each year. Through face-to-face connection in schools, cafes, youth centers, and social clubs, they ask three questions:

- ④ What do you want to see change in Samsun?
- ④ What is missing for young people in Samsun?
- ④ What is necessary for youth in Samsun?

The team designs the funding focus each year based on the aggregated responses, and then disseminates a request for proposals through many of the same channels they used for administering the survey. Read this [case study](#) to learn more about Seher and the Samsun YouthBank.





## Gaps in Data

### RECOGNIZE WHAT YOU CAN'T KNOW, AND WHY

If your question simply isn't answerable based on available data, it might be because that data is protected or doesn't exist, or because you would need data analysis skills that your team is not trained for. By recognizing why there's a gap in what you can know, you may be able to refocus your curiosity and/or find creative ways to approach the problem from new angles.

### CONNECT WITH OTHERS

Connect with people and organizations with a similar mission, and compare approaches to getting the data you need. There might be ways to tackle the gap together, raise awareness about the challenge through an article or community meeting, or co-fund another organization to help develop the data.

### DEVELOP SKILLS TO ANALYZE DATA

Raw data is often out there but needs a framework for understanding. Don't reinvent the wheel; discover what frameworks, rubrics, and logic model examples are out there that you may be able to adapt for your program. [YouthREX's Logic Model Template](#) is a good place to start.

What do you anticipate your biggest data challenge will be? Why will it be a challenge?  
What are two ways you could mitigate that challenge?

"Data is concrete, it tells the story of your programs through numbers and impact. Having those examples can really help to bring additional advocates and funders to support youth philanthropy programs."

-- PROGRAM DIRECTOR, REGIONAL ASSOCIATION YOUTH PHILANTHROPY INITIATIVE

# EASY STEPS TO USING A DATA LENS



## Collect or find some easy-to-gather data.

Here are some suggested data points to start with. Check “YES” if you’re already gathering it, “ON MY WAY” if you’re going to start this program year, or “NO” if it’s not possible for you:

DATA POINTS	YES	ON MY WAY	NO
<b>PROGRAM PARTICIPANT INFORMATION</b> (age, hometown, school)			
<b>COMMUNITY INFORMATION</b> (demographics, needs, attrition rates for local high schools)			
<b>GRANT BENEFICIARY INFORMATION</b> (issue, population served, accessibility)			
<b>OTHER PROGRAMS THAT ARE NEAR OR SIMILAR TO YOURS</b> (use YouthGiving.org’s <a href="#">program directory</a> or <a href="#">funding map</a> !)			



## Build data into your weekly or quarterly work process.

Plan out where your data inputs will come from and what you will do with those inputs. Add all important milestones to your project plan or calendar.



## Host a brown bag lunch to talk about an interesting data point connected with your work.

Once stakeholders at your organization and in your community see how data can be a launching point for discussion and understanding an issue, it becomes easier to introduce a data lens culture.

Want to talk about a data lens with younger grantmakers?

Check out our snazzy [infographic](#).

